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China

493



SOUTH CHINA BOAT MISSION

THE BOAT PEOPLE OF SOUTH CHINA

No visitor to China can fail to be impressed with the great number of boats on its rivers. The boats are of all descriptions, from the massive junk, with its high stern and nut-brown sail, down to a little sampan. These boats travel to and from all parts of the country, bringing cargoes of grain, wood, salt or other commodities, returning with a cargo of another kind. The boat people are a class distinct from the land people, and are regarded by the land people as very inferior to themselves. Under the Manchu government the boat people were excluded from all literary examinations, which meant that they could never hold any official position; they were not allowed to hold property, and were forbidden to marry land people. These

restrictions, however, have been removed to a great extent since the establishment of the Chinese Republic. But in most places the boat people are still a class apart, more or less despised and distrusted by the land Chinese.

THE ORIGIN OF THE BOAT PEOPLE

The origin of the boat people is very uncertain. Around Canton there are a number of traditions concerning it, the most remarkable of which is as follows: Originally they lived on land, along the lower delta, and so, of course, were compelled to pay taxes as all land people did. One year there was a great flood, and when the tax collectors came around, the people protested that they had nothing to pay. The officials realized that this was so, therefore released them from their obligations that year. But when the next year came round they made the same plea, that they were very poor and had nothing to pay. That year the official would not accept their excuse, and insisted that they must pay something. The people protested that all they had to give was eggs, so the official said that he would accept the eggs in payment of their taxes.

This continued for a number of years, until a new official came into that territory who was not willing to accept eggs in payment and sent his tax collectors to compel the people to pay what was due. When the people realized that they were going to be forced to pay, they all took to boats and hid around the bend of the river, so that when the collectors came there was no one in sight. This happened again and again, until finally the official decided to put an end to it. He made an agreement with the people from the upper country that at a certain signal they were to come down and take possession of the fields and villages belonging to the tax evading people on the lower delta. When the tax collectors once more found the villages empty, they gave the signal to the other group

who at once came down and took possession of all the land formerly owned by the "Egg People." The governor at once issued a proclamation that henceforth these people were never to own land, that they were to be forbidden the official examinations and were not to be allowed to marry the land people. It left them only their boats and hence, they were forced to depend on the water for a living. So today, wherever Cantonese is spoken, we have what is known as the "Taan-ka," or "Egg People."

Other places, however, have different traditions concerning the origin of the local boat people, such as that at Foochow where the story goes that in the beginning several families were condemned to live on boats because they opened a blockade on the river that the French might enter. From these families have sprung all the existing boat people, or so it is said. It is an interesting fact that around Foochow most of the boat people have the surname Ling or Gong. Actually the origin of the various groups of boat people is not known.

THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

Although the boat people are despised by the land people, and often treated with the greatest contempt, in many ways they are not at all inferior. Especially in mental ability and in business affairs, they are quite equal to Chinese who live on shore. As to education, due to lack of opportunity, illiteracy is far greater among the river people, but given the same chance, the average boat boy or girl does as well as one whose parents live on land.

Most of the boat people are scrupulously clean, both as to their persons and their boats. Though perhaps cruder in their manners than the land Chinese, they often show an innate courtesy that is decidedly lacking in the poorer groups on land. Their boats, called sampans, literally three boards, are from

fifteen to twenty feet long and from four to six feet wide. Often they are the homes of families of seven or eight people. There is a bamboo covering over the top of the boat, so low one cannot stand upright under it, and around the sides are curtains of cloth, or canvas, or bamboo to keep out the rain and sun. The board flooring of the boat serves for table and chairs during the day and for beds at night. There is very little privacy possible.



Bedding is kept under the floor boards during the daytime, along with any extra clothes and the few treasures they may have. Dishes, bowls and chop sticks find a place in the small cubby holes along the sides of the boat. On the idol shelf in the back of the boat are the family gods, sometimes beautifully carved and covered with gold leaf. Flowers are often there and an incense burner. Some of the poorer boats often have the small idol shelf fastened to the side of the boat, with a curtain hanging in front and incense and flowers in hanging containers.

They are a very superstitious people and hold closely to their religion which is a mixture of the three great religions of China—Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. They have great faith in their heathen priests who sometimes live on boats, right among the people. These evil men are called upon in case of sickness and death, and for weddings, to ward

off ill luck, or to open the doors of Hades and release the soul of the departed.

In the past, the great majority of the boat women and girls never went on land, so in order to reach them, it was necessary to live among them. Now, however, the greater freedom allowed to women and girls all over China has reached the boat women to a certain extent, and one often sees groups of them on land in the shops or on the streets. They are easily distinguished by their weather-beaten features and their peculiar walk on their usually bare feet. But it is still only on the water that one can get close to them and tell them of the Saviour's love, and it is on the Gospel Boats that they love to sit and talk as friend to friend, confiding their troubles to their very own missionary and learning in this way to love and trust the One who died for them.

BEGINNING OF THE WORK OF S.C.B.M.

The work among the boat people of South China began thus: A woman by the name of Miss Alexander, living in Hong Kong, was greatly impressed by the neglected condition of the boat people there, and longed that they might be reached with the Gospel. Sometime in 1909 she met Miss Florence Drew, a young woman living in Chicago, who was so greatly impressed by the need of these people that she felt it was God's call to go and labor among them. She decided to obey the call and started out for Hong Kong, though she had no promise of support and very little money of her own. About three months after her arrival, as her funds were rapidly vanishing, she obtained a position in an office in Hong Kong. She worked only two hours each day, devoting her remaining time to the study of the language and in attempts to reach the boat people with the Gospel.

This continued for over four months, until a company of

friends in Chicago voluntarily assumed her support. From that time on she gave her whole effort, indeed, all the rest of her life, to the people whom she loved and pitied. God graciously supplied not only her own needs, but the needs of the expanding work as well. With increasing needs came increased supply, and we expect it to continue that way, for "He is faithful who promised."

After Miss Drew had been in Hong Kong about a year, her brother, Rev. Edward Drew, joined her. Attempts had been made in Hong Kong to reach the boat people by having a chapel on the water's edge, but the work was unsatisfactory for two reasons: First, the boat people did not like to come to the chapel and second, the few who did muster up courage to enter, were invariably crowded out by the land people.

When the Drews heard of a Gospel Boat called the "Morning Star" for sale by the Swedish Mission of Canton, they purchased it feeling that the Lord was indeed opening up the work before them. This, the first of the Gospel Boats, became their headquarters at Canton. Soon after Mr. Drew arrived in Hong Kong, he and his sister moved to Canton, realizing that place to be much more of a center for work among the boat people, since it had, it was estimated, six times the boat population of Hong Kong. From that time on, Canton has been the headquarters in China of the South China Boat Mission.

During the years since Miss Drew started the work for the boat people by her courageous venture into the, to her, unknown waters of China, there have been many trials and testings of faith, many discouragements and heartaches. But always the manifest purpose of God that the boat people should be reached with the message of salvation and His gracious provision and protection have kept the work going on in spite of war and all the other attacks of the enemy.

Miss Drew, herself, went home to be with the Lord on December 21, 1932, after nearly a quarter of a century of fruitful ministry. She had not only founded the work, but for a number of years acted as Field Secretary of the South China Boat Mission. The boat people of China and the Boat Mission certainly owe a great debt to this pioneer of the faith on the waterways of China.

In 1913 Mr. Drew returned to America and was instrumental in organizing a Home Council. This Council was composed of a number of consecrated businessmen and pastors who had consented to stand back of the work of the South China Boat Mission by prayer, counsel and in any other way the Lord might lead and enable.

The years which have passed since these beginnings, have brought increased blessings. The Lord not only has raised up new workers and many friends, but has provided new boats from time to time. These additions have been placed in advantageous positions in other centers where the need seemed great. At one time 24 missionaries were on the field occupying six stations and three provinces.

DIFFICULTIES OF THE BOAT WORK

There are many things that make work among the boat people difficult. Only a few of the "perils" mentioned by Paul in the eleventh chapter of Second Corinthians fall to the lot of the boat missionary, but those that do are very real. Always there are the "perils of waters," the ever present menace of the swiftly flowing streams, of typhoons and other seasonal storms, sudden floods, robbers and bandits and petty thieves, the cold and the heat, the weariness and the watching. There are also the difficulties which every new missionary must face: becoming accustomed to a new climate and strange food, learning a

new language, and adjusting one's thoughts and attitudes to Chinese life and customs.

But greater than all these are the difficulties presented by the people themselves and their way of life. They are a moving people, their sampans are often in the neighborhood of the Gospel Boat for only a few days at a time, so that even when their hearts are touched by the Message and they have a real desire to become Christians, they do not remain long enough in one place to get established in the truth. Of course there are many exceptions to this—boat people whose sampans are anchored in the same place night after night, who carry passengers and freight within a restricted area. It is of the latter group that our Boat Churches are composed. How we thank God for them—men and women truly born again, growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord.

On the other hand, many who have confessed Christ have gone to other places and it has been impossible to keep in touch with them and to know whether they have continued in the faith or not. Often too, one seems to see the beginnings of the working of the Spirit in the hearts of some and hears a desire expressed to learn more of the "doctrine," only to find on a second visit that their boat is gone, perhaps never to be in reach of the Gospel again. And though one leaves Scripture portions with them, so few can read that there is no assurance that the books will be used. One can only trust them to the Heavenly Father's care, knowing that if He has begun a good work in them, He will surely perfect it.

Then they are such busy people. Life is hard, for most of them are very poor and all of them need the money they earn by such difficult labor. Many feel they cannot take the time to come to the services or to learn to read. A good many of this class are reached by medical work, for while they might not be willing to go across the river to hear the Gospel, they

will bring their sick a long distance to get medicine. Thus they are brought into direct contact with the Gospel, often to the saving of the soul, even though sometimes it is too late for the healing of the body.

But if there are difficulties, the rewards of the work are great, too. To feel that one is ministering to souls who would never have heard the Gospel in any other way, is in itself a great reward, as well as a great incentive to more intense labor among these people. For there are still many absolutely untouched centers of boat population, still thousands of boats going up and down the rivers of China that the Gospel has not reached.

OUR ENCOURAGEMENT AND OUR HOPE



We are encouraged by His promise that His Word shall not return to Him void. Much of our work is sowing the seed in faith, but there are also those jewels for His crown who stand out prominently as faithful proclaimers of the gospel among their own people wherever they go. They not only distribute gospel tracts to others on the river and witness to the passengers they row about, but bring their friends and relatives to gospel meetings.

This is our hope. The present aim and prayer of the South China Boat Mission is that

there may yet be a gospel witness in every large center of boat population. It is a great task that is set before us, but our God is able. We know that His heart of love is yearning over these people who are His by right of the redemption purchased for them on Calvary's cross.

DOCTRINAL BELIEF

- I. We believe the Bible is the Word and revelation of God and therefore our only authority.
- II. We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He is very God "by whom and for whom all things were created."
- III. We believe in His virgin birth, that He was miraculously conceived of the Holy Spirit and therefore God manifested in the flesh.
- IV. We believe in salvation by Divine sacrifice, that the Son of God "gave Himself a ransom for all" and "bare our sins in His own body on the tree."
- V. We believe in His physical resurrection from the dead and in His bodily presence at the right hand of God as our High Priest and Advocate. We also believe in the literal bodily resurrection of all true believers at His second coming.
- VI. We believe in the universality and heinousness of sin and in salvation by grace, "not by works, lest any man should boast"; that sonship with God is attained only by faith in Jesus Christ and regeneration through the Holy Spirit.

- VII. We believe in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit, who came down upon the earth on the day of Pentecost to indwell believers and to be the administrator in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, also to "reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment."
- VIII. We believe in the great commission which our Lord has given to His church to evangelize the world and that this evangelization is the great mission of the church.
- IX. We believe in the second, personal, and imminent coming of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, for the church and also to establish His world-wide Kingdom on earth.
- X. We believe in a heaven of eternal bliss for the righteous, and in a hell of conscious and eternal punishment for the wicked.



For further particulars and other literature, write to

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